

OAKA

Cilt:7, Sayı: 13, ss. 106-136, 2012



## RUSSIAN MEDIA'S ROLE IN THE FIRST (1994-1996) AND SECOND (1999-2000) CHECHNYA WARS

### I. (1994-1996) VE II. (1999-2000) ÇEÇEN SAVAŞLARINDA RUS MEDYASININ ROLÜ

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#### ABSTRACT

*The great majority of the Russians did not support their country's military intervention in Chechnya during the 1994-96 Russo-Chechen War. During the Second Chechen War, however, beginning in the autumn of 1999, a turnaround occurred. Now a majority of Russians stood behind their government's decision to regain control over the hitherto independent Chechnya. Such support was in part in response to a string of high-profile terrorist attacks in Russian cities by Chechen rebels and the spread of the separatist movement into neighboring provinces such as Dagestan. In addition, much of this shift in public support at the time was attributed to the pivotal role broadcast media played in the second Chechen war. This analysis focuses on the marked change in public perception by studying the Russian media, its role in shaping opinions, and how reporting from the conflict zone transformed Russian people's attitudes.*

**Key Words:** Russia, Chechnya, Media, Security, South Caucasus, Conflict

#### ÖZET

*1994-96 yıllarındaki ilk Rus-Çeçen Savaşı'nda Rus halkı ülkelerinin Çeçenistan'a askeri müdahalede bulunmasını desteklememişti. Fakat, 1999 güzündeki II. Çeçen Savaşı sırasında olaylar tersine döndü. Artık Rus halkının büyük bir çoğunluğu Çeçenistan'ın o zamana kadar bir yönüyle sürdürebildiği "bağımsızlığı" karşısında kontrolü yeniden kazanması için devletin kararlarını destekler hale geldi. Bu desteğin nedeni Çeçen direnişçilerin Rus şehirlerine yapılan bir dizi terör saldırısına tepki göstermek ve ayrılıkçı hareketin Dağıstan gibi çevre eyaletlere yayılmasında yatmaktaydı. Ayrıca, kamuoyundaki bu fikir değişikliğinde II. Çeçen savaşı sırasında medyanın rolünün oldukça önemli olduğu değerlendirilmektedir. Bu analiz, toplumsal algıdaki değişime odaklanarak, medyanın nasıl fikirleri şekillendirdiğine ve nasıl çatışma bölgesinden bildirerek Rus halkının bakış açısını değiştirdiğini incelemiştir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Rusya, Çeçenistan, Medya, Güvenlik, Güney Kafkasya, Çatışma

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The first Chechen war started in mid-December 1994 and continued until mid-August 1996. The majority of Russians were opposed to the war from the very beginning, as Russia was making war with its own population. According to polls conducted by the Moscow-based Public Opinion Foundation shortly after Russian forces entered Chechnya, and again in January 1995, 63% and 71% respectively opposed sending the military forces into the region.<sup>1</sup> In a second poll, just over half (52%) of respondents condemned the action of the Russian military, while 20% approved.<sup>2</sup> In a conference paper published in 2000 Emil Pain, Boris Yeltsin's former Chechnya adviser, also claimed that "two-third of respondents" were "opposed to the use of military solution in dealing with the problem during the 1995 military campaign."<sup>3</sup> Near the end of 1995, when fighting in Chechnya was far less intensive than in spring of the same year, polls demonstrated that popular opposition to the war was still running high, and to such a degree that that it could threaten Yeltsin's re-election at the forthcoming presidential elections. Upon a successful election, Yeltsin obtained yet another mandate from Russian voters, but, he faced strong competition in the first round of the ballot from General Aleksandr Lebed, whose platform was largely based on peacefully putting an end to the war in Chechnya.

In late September 1999, when Russian forces were mobilized and sent back into Chechen territory, the overall mood of the Russian people's towards the war shifted in the opposite direction. According to an article that appeared in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, in mid-October 1999, just under half (49%) of respondents in a national poll expressed "support for an air campaign against Chechnya."<sup>4</sup> Even after launching massive air strikes on Grozny and the escalation of the Russian forces' military operations outside the so-called "security zone," which was created in northern Chechnya, the Russian people remained largely supportive of the Army's attacks. A Public Opinion Foundation poll conducted in November 1999 demonstrated that among 2,000 respondents, nearly two-thirds (64%) supported "the Russian forces' military actions in Chechnya," while just under one

1 See Robert W. Schaefer, *The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: from Gazavat to Jihad*, (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger Security International, 2010), p. 34.

2 Ibid.

3 Emil Pain, "Vozmozhnye varianty dinamiki vtoroj chechenskoj vojny", paper presented at the conference "The International Community and Strategies for Peace and Stability in and around Chechnya", (Stockholm: Utrikespolitiska Institutet, 27-28 April 2000).

4 Vladimir Degojev, "Russia's Dirty War, Again", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 23 October 1999, ([http://www.ng.ru/english/dirty\\_war.html](http://www.ng.ru/english/dirty_war.html)).

in four respondents (23%) were opposed. In January 2000, support had reached two thirds (67%), while the percentage against the war stood at less than a quarter (22%). In an interview to the Russian journal *Russkaya Mysl* in mid-March 2000, Yuri Leveda, director of the All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM), stated that “nearly 70% of the population supports the war.”<sup>5</sup>

There was not only a striking change in public attitude to military action in Chechnya but also an overall change in attitude that had transpired over a remarkably short span of time. The majority of Russians, according to Emil Pain, categorically opposed any suggestion of resuming hostilities with Chechnya in the spring of 1999. Furthermore, a poll indicated that eight out of ten (82%) of Russians were even ready “in one form or another to accept Chechnya’s separation from Russia.”<sup>6</sup>

Yuri Levada also confirmed this shift in attitude. In a May 2000 interview with *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, he noted that “the war, while not so long ago considered a curse, now proves popular. In May, he continued, of last year (1999), as you know, an impeachment attempt was brought against the President (Yeltsin) and the most critical count in the accusation was the war in Chechnya. At the time, nearly eight in ten respondents (76%) favored Yeltsin’s departure because of his handling of the war. Less than a year later Russians seemed pleased with the war!” However, only 15% were actually ready to take up arms and join the Army on the battlefield.<sup>7</sup>

The main assumption of this article is that the control of the media helped the Russian government justify the war and ultimately to “win” it. The Kremlin learned the lesson of the of the first Chechen war (1994-1996), which ended in fiasco in terms of Russia’s image in the world, the reputation of the armed forces and Russian citizens’ respect towards their political leaders.

### **Socio-Psychological Factors**

What caused the quick change in public attitudes towards the use of military force in Chechnya in 1999-2000? Complex causal relations are difficult to study because political, social, economic and psychological factors played a role in this

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5 See Matthew Evangelista, *The Chechen Wars: Will Russia Go the Way of the Soviet Union?*, (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), p.121.

6 Emil Pain, “Vozmozhnye varianty dinamiki vtoroj chechenskoj vojny”, p. 6.

7 Ibid.

turnaround in Russian public opinion. The second military campaign in Chechnya began in late September 1999 after Russian troops a month before had defeated a group of Muslim-fundamentalist rebels (the so-called Wahhabists) in the Republic of Dagestan and forced out a group of Chechen-based militants led by the notorious field commander Shamil Basayev, who had participated in the rebel insurgency in Dagestan.

Russian forces' successful military operation against what the new Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin called "international terrorists" came at a time when popular confidence in the Kremlin's capabilities was at its lowest level; the armed forces' prestige and standing had reached rock bottom in the aftermath of the unpopular and unsuccessful first Chechen War. In addition, the hope for improvement in social conditions had dwindled in the wake of the economic crisis that hit Russia hard in the autumn of 1998. Finally, those who had the energy to take an interest in politics felt severely humiliated by Russia's increasing marginalization in the international arena.<sup>8</sup>

Emil Pain's analysis of the Russians' socio-psychological reaction to the operation in Dagestan was probably close to reality: "Tired of defeats (economic, political, and military), greater Russian society suddenly developed a thirst for victories. Then came messages from Dagestan that the armed forces had triumphed over bandits who had entered the republic from Chechnya. The mood of the Russian public had literally changed overnight. People began to believe that it is also possible to finally resolve the Chechen problem by the use of force and by bringing about law and order throughout the country with 'an iron hand,' – an image that suddenly materialized in the form of Putin's own flesh and blood."<sup>9</sup>

The successful military operations in remote and extraneous Dagestan, in itself, was hardly enough to cause such a drastic change in Russians' attitude towards the war. The decisive turning point came shortly after dozens of Muslim-led insurgents were killed in Dagestan and Basayev group had to retreat to Chechnya. Shortly thereafter, on September 4, 1999 an apartment block blew up in Buynaksk, a small provincial town in Dagestan, located some 40 km southwest of Makhachkala, the capital. It was followed on September 9 and 13 by similar deadly explosions in three apartment blocks in Moscow and Volgodonsk.

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8 See, Jan Koehler, *Potentials of Disorder: Explaining Conflict and Stability in the Caucasus and in the Former Yugoslavia*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 232-250.

9 Emil Pain, "Vozmozhnye varianty dinamiki vtoroj chechenskoj vojny", p. 4.

This series of apartment block bombings, which killed at least 300 people and sent shockwaves throughout all of Russia, was attributed by President Putin to “international terrorists.”<sup>10</sup> It is reasonable to believe, considering the events at the time, that the powerful bombings of apartment blocks where just ordinary Russians lived, and Putin’s insinuations about who was likely behind these violent acts, were the main reasons for the abrupt change in attitude toward the war as a mean to conflict resolution.<sup>11</sup>

Another factor that most likely played a role was the NATO bombing of Serbia (still part of Federal Republic of Yugoslavia at that time) during the Kosovo War which lasted from March 24, 1999 to June 11, 1999.<sup>12</sup> Within many circles in the Kremlin, but also in large segments of the Russian population, it was believed that if NATO countries could legitimize carrying out air strikes on military targets in the sovereign territory of Serbia, then it was certainly justifiable for Russia to carry out bombing raids against an enemy suspected of having links with terrorist organizations and perpetuating violent crimes on its own territory.<sup>13</sup>

Although these events had major socio-psychological effects, again they are not sufficient on their own to explain the change of attitude towards war among Russian public opinion. In the following section, the role of the Russian mass media is added to the chain of causes and effects leading to the change in opinion pertaining to the Second Chechen War

### **The Role of the Media**

In modern societies the media, especially the national media covering the whole territory of a nation-state, have enormous influence on public consciousness. It is through the media that those who do not find themselves at the center of events get information about what is happening in their locality, country and the whole world. It is also by dint of the media that modern citizens put together their own explanatory framework for making sense of social events, political processes and policy decisions.

There were two TV channels operating on a national level at the time of the Second Chechen War. One was RTV (The All-Russian State Television), which

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10 See Cindy D. Ness, *Female Terrorism and Militancy: Agency, Utility, and Organization*, (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2007).

11 See Tracey C. German, *Russia’s Chechen War*, (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), pp. 40-51.

12 See, Peter Van Ham, *Mapping European Security After Kosovo*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 37-42.

13 Aleksandr Verkhovskij, “Novy revoljutsionery,” *Russkaya Mysl*, 18-24 November 1999, p. 6.

was a full state-owned channel. The other, ORT (*Pervii Kanal*), which is the successor of the Soviet *Gosteleradio*), was 51% owned by the Russian government. The other main broadcasting networks were privately-run NTV (the Independent Television) and *TV Tsentr*, which was established in the autumn of 1997 based on a decision by then-Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov. The two privately-owned TV broadcasters could only reach about one-third of the Russian population.<sup>14</sup>

In comparison to the First Chechen War, the media coverage of the second military campaign in 1999 was much more one-sided both in the run-up to the war (a few months prior to the onset of hostilities) and during the hostilities. Partiality in analyzing and reporting was highest in the initial phase of the bombings and this new media strategy implemented by the Russian government was crucial in not only altering public attitude to the war but also in cementing a pro-war sentiment among ordinary Russians.

In a liberal and democratic society, the media acts as a “watchdog” in protecting the interests of diverse social groups. The unconstrained dissemination of information is a prerequisite for a well-functioning democracy (and, for that matter, well-functioning markets). The existence of free media is also a prerequisite for independent and vibrant civil society. A crucial factor that explains the Russian population’s change in attitude towards war as a problem-solving mechanism was the existence of a weakly-developed civil society and the poor performance of the Russian mass media in its role as a provider of information – acting as a so-called independent “watchdog.”<sup>15</sup> The Russian media’s conduct during the 1999 war revealed that media networks were still not autonomous and abusively utilized by the Kremlin in its own interests and policy agendas.

### **Media’s Behavior during the First War**

Already during the months leading up to the 1999 war Russian print media such as *Izvestija*, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* and *Moskovskie Novosti* presented a nuanced picture of what was happening in Chechnya and published skilled analysis of the sequence of events. The same could be observed also after the war broke out in 1999. The state-owned TV channels were however immediately subject to censorship, although this state policy was never really able to achieve its goal.

14 See Sarah Oates & Gillian McCormack, “The Media and Political Communication”, in Stephen White (Ed.), *Developments in Russian Politics 7*, (Duke University Press, 2010).

15 See Robert Brannon, *Russian Civil-Military Relations*, (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2009).

According to Western commentators, the Kremlin's policy reminded them of the strict control which Soviet authorities exercised on the state-media information service during the first weeks after a military intervention in a satellite country. However, journalists' body language, their ironic comments and other equivocal gestures transmitted "an entirely different message." Censorship stranglehold on television could not be sustained for very long.<sup>16</sup>

Privately owned newspapers and the independent television channel NTV – which had in particular a huge impact – covered the war in a very professional and balanced fashion. Vladimir Gusinsky, NTV's owner and banker, disapproved of the military invasion. According to Western sources, he received repeated warnings from Yeltsin's personal security chief, confidant and adviser, Aleksander Korzhakov.<sup>17</sup> The private media also showed a picture of the war through different lenses, more nuanced. For example, the editor-in-chief of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* wrote articles supporting war, even though the newspaper's own correspondents sent reports from the battlefield that sharply contrasted their boss's editorial arguments and position.<sup>18</sup> Generally speaking, the media acted as the "fourth power," – that is, as a "watchdog."

Thus, the independent media did resist pressure from the authorities, which, despite the fact that President Yeltsin himself repeatedly insisted that he supported press freedom, tried to put limitations on the media. These were manifested in different ways, from direct restrictions to burdensome and draw out accreditation procedures for journalists. Obtaining access to Russian ground forces was severely curtailed. Some journalist found other ways to get information, approaching Chechens rebels and their field commanders as their main source of information. The latter were very open to both Russian and foreign journalists and effectively supplied them with information that would have otherwise been impossible to obtain on the ongoing conflict. Having lost control over the media, Russian authorities went as far as accusing the media of having been bought "bought" by "Chechen bandits."<sup>19</sup>

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16 Robert W. Schaefer, *The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad*, (Praeger, 2010), p. 88-95.

17 Michael McFaul, "A Precarious Peace. Domestic Politics in the Making of Russian Foreign Policy", *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 3, 1997/98.

18 Boris Kagarlitskij, "Chechnya: predvaritelnye itogi. Chechenskaya vojna v obshchestvennom mnenie", *Svobodnaya Mysl*, Vol. 40, January 1997.

19 Robert W. Schaefer, op. cit., p. 50.

However, it must be underscored that heavy and systematic criticism of the war was raised and carried on by a relatively limited number of main media outlets. At the regional level, Yeltsin-appointed governors, whose positions had been greatly strengthened after the disintegration of regional Soviets in the wake of power showdown in Moscow in October 1993, reigned supreme over much of the regional media.<sup>20</sup>

Sergey Kovalev, a human rights activist, one of a few journalists who contributed the most to contradict the state propaganda, was outspoken from the very onset of the war. He hung about in Grozny during the indiscriminate bombing of the city and ground assault on the Chechen Republic in January 1995 and later he appeared frequently on the independent channel NTV. In an article published in *The New York Review of Books* in 1997, he wrote: "The war was won by freedom of speech. By the several dozen honest journalist – just a few – who continued to describe the truth about Chechnya to hundred of thousands of readers and with the help of millions of television viewers, despite having been pressured from the government. They were forced to broadcast official lies as well as the truth. But we are adults and know how to distinguish lies from truth".<sup>21</sup>

An *Open Media Research Institute (OMRI)* poll conducted in February and March 1995 showed that 60% of respondents trusted the Moscow-based media, while 37% did not. "Of the variety of sources participants used to follow the unfolding crisis in Chechnya, reporting by the Independent Television, radio and press are considered the most trustworthy," stated the authors of an article published in the magazine *Transitions*.<sup>22</sup> Ordinary Russians could watch the death and flight of Chechen noncombatants, the destruction of homes and factories on major Russian TV news with their own eyes. That led even to demonstrations on the streets of Moscow against the military action. The unfettered diffusion of media reports from battle areas was viewed by many as a confirmation that Russian reporting had recovered from Soviet censorship.<sup>23</sup>

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20 Ibid.

21 Sergei Kovalev, "Russia after Chechnya", *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. 31, 17 July 1997.

22 Susan Gigli, & Matthew Warshaw, "Trust Wary in Russia's Media," *Transition*, 28 July 1995, p. 52.

23 See Olga Oliker, *Russia's Chechen Wars 1994-2000: Lessons from Urban Combat*, (Santa Monica: RAND, 2001).



## Between the Two Wars

While critical journalists had demonstrated during most of the last war that they took their ‘watchdog’ role quite seriously, it soon became apparent that they were willing to give up this role for tactical reasons. During the presidential election in the summer of 1996, they made common cause with business “oligarchs” in ensuring that Yeltsin stayed in power. Both journalists and “financial princes” sought to prevent Gennady Zyuganov, the First Secretary and leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) from winning the elections. For that reason, they were willing to support the re-election of President Yeltsin. That strategic act revealed that journalists and ‘liberal forces’ could be collectively mobilized in supporting specific and shared political objectives.<sup>24</sup>

The TV channel NTV, which had been a leading organization in criticizing Yeltsin’s 20-month war in Chechnya, the state-owned ORT, whose shares were distributed between state agencies (51%) and private shareholders – mainly Boris Berezovsky – the fully state-owned RTV, all stood behind Yeltsin during the presidential election campaign. Igor Malashenko, director of NTV, in an interview in mid-April 1996 claimed that if Russian independent media had covered the 1996 presidential election in an “unbiased” fashion, “professionally and objectively,” Zyuganov would have won the election and journalists would have permanently lost their freedom of expression. Consequently, they figured out that it was better for their self-interests to be used as a temporary “propaganda tool”.<sup>25</sup> Progressively, pragmatism came to dominate among journalists – the end justified the means – and in the 1999 Russian-Chechen war it overshadowed their previous ‘watchdog’ role.

There are several explanations – not just political ones – for the journalists’ new approach to their work. After the media’s efforts during the First Chechen War, it became clear that the media was a powerful weapon that not only politicians but also the increasingly self-conscious financiers could benefit in strengthening their power base. In 1994-95 there were still many small and creative media enterprises – especially in the print and press sector – which were guided by the model that was established after the Russian media had rid itself of

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24 See Carlotta Gall & Thomas de Waal, *Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus*, (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 110-120.

25 Laura Belin, “Politicization and Self-Censorship in the Russian Media”, paper presented at the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, (Washington: Annual Congress, November 1997).

the Communist Party's media control; that is, they had editorial collectives and boards independent from governmental agencies whose objective was to control the national press. However, due to rising production and distribution costs and reduced purchasing power among consumers, newspapers were forced to seek new funding sources as subscriptions and advertisement revenues were quickly dwindling and drying up.

It was at that moment that the so-called "oligarchs" seized on the opportunity to tighten their grip on media companies. For example, Vitaly Tretyakov, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* chief editor, on several occasions had refused both financial aid and sponsorship from wealthy Russians in order to maintain the newspaper's editorial independence. However, in the autumn of 1995 he finally gave in and sought financial help from one of the most prominent of the 'financial baron,' Boris Berezovsky.<sup>26</sup> In the mid-1990s Vladimir Gusinsky of *Most Bank* (which was founded in 1991 with Moscow City Council as its main client) made an incursion into the media sector. He quickly built up a media empire centered on NTV, the radio station *Ekho Moskvy*, the popular *Segodnya* tabloid type newspaper and *Itogi* magazine.

Despite these takeovers by the new Russian "business class," the dependency of the media on 'financial barons' was still not a fact of life in modern day Russia; the media remained mostly independent from the control of 'financial barons.' The situation started to change in the second half of the 1990s. During the 1996 presidential election the newspaper *Obshchaya Gazeta*, headed by Yegor Yakovlev, had retained a relatively independent editorial policy and autonomy in its financing. It was no longer possible in the summer of 1997 and it asked for Gusinsky's help.<sup>27</sup> After the 1996 presidential election very few newspapers that had formally been owned by groups of journalists could afford to do without financial backing from 'financial barons.' The problem lay in the fact that very few small and medium size enterprises in the media sector had reached a level of development that would allow them to advertise their product on a larger scale.<sup>28</sup> The only alternative for small-size newspapers and broadcasters was to knock at the door of oligarchs' conglomerates. The difficulty of finding new sources of revenues was further exacerbated by the financial crisis that hit Russia in the au-

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26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

tumn of 1998. Many media enterprises had bought so-called GKO bonds ((*Gosudarstvennoye Kratkosrochnoye Obyazatelstvo*, short-term Russian government Treasury Bills) introduced on May 7, 1993. In 1998 the Russian government defaulted on its GKO obligations and sent many media businesses into turmoil and even bankruptcy.

Some journalists, however, quickly realized that their alliances with financial barons were but a baited trap. It was the case, for instance, for *Izvestia* journalists who sold shares to the Lukoil group at the end of 1996.<sup>29</sup> In April 1997 the newspaper published an article that claimed that the then Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin had made a fortune by exploiting his government position. Lukoil management vehemently protested. The newspaper, which described itself as an “all-national” newspaper of Russia, then decided to sell a percentage of its shares to Oneksimbank, which was owned by the oligarch Vladimir Potanin who had close governmental ties in the hope that this would force Lukoil to tone down its protest campaign against *Izvestia*. But Oneksimbank and Lukoil joined together and called for the Chief Editor Igor Golombiovskij to resign. In the ensuing years *Izvestia*’s editorial positions and treatment of information echoed in its pages Oneksimbank’s interests, that is, Potanin’s interests.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Media as the Voice of Warring ‘Financial Princes’**

The oligarchs’ increasing foothold in the Russian media industry drove the latter to give a greater voice to certain financial interests, which resulted in a series of “media wars.” In the summer of 1997 ORT, Berezovsky-controlled ORT and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* led a smear campaign against Deputy Prime Ministers Anatoly Tchubais and Boris Nemtsov and Oneksimbank in the battle for control of Russia’s large telecommunications company Svyazinvest. Gusinsky-controlled NTV and *Segodnya* newspaper also took part in the attacks. (Both Berezovsky and Gusinsky were interested in buying Svyazinvest.) Newspapers in which Oneksimbank – the eventual ‘winner’ – had a control stake also launched their own campaign in support for Tchubais and Nemtsov and lobbied scurrilous attacks Berezovsky.<sup>31</sup>

In the summer of 1999 another media ‘war’ broke out between ORT/Berezovsky and NTV/Gusinsky. Contrary to the 1996 presidential election, this time

29 Ibid.

30 See R. Nichol Ulric (Ed.), *Focus on Politics and Economics of Russia and Eastern Europe*, (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2007).

31 Laura Belin, “Politicization and Self-Censorship in the Russian Media”.

it was unlikely that these media magnates would agree on a presidential candidate. NTV/Gusinsky supported Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov who had just formed his own political faction, *Otechestvo* (Fatherland) – it later merged with *Vsya Rossiya* (All Russia) to form the *Otechestvo-Vsya Rossiya* Party – entertained high hopes of success in the upcoming presidential election.<sup>32</sup> Berezovsky, who now had close ties with Yeltsin's inner circle, the so-called "family," accused Luzhkov of spreading malicious rumors about shady deals having links with the Kremlin. Furthermore, ORT accused NTV/Gusinsky to undermine Russia's economic stability. For its part, NTV hinted that Berezovsky was doing business with the Chechen terrorists.<sup>33</sup> However, once this mudslinging came to an end, the editorial board of both NTV and ORT, in spite of their affiliation with 'financial princes' and other financial stakeholders, argued in their editorials that actually no one in Russia took the coverage of this 'battle' seriously. These NTV and ORT 'reports' never had credibility because it could have been easily suspected that they were dubious means used to weaken political opponents or business competitors.

### Media during the Second Chechnya War

Unlike in 1994-96, images of the military operation disseminated by the Russian mass media after the start of the Second Chechen War on August 26 were heavily controlled by the Army and political authorities.<sup>34</sup> Only in mid-November, a little more than a month after Russian troops had moved into Chechnya, began to emerge from the battleground a more nuanced picture of the armed conflict. But Between the launch of the war, in response to the invasion of Dagestan by the Islamic International Peacekeeping Brigade (IIPB, one of three terrorist groups affiliated with Chechen guerrillas), and mid-November, the way the Russian media presented the conflict, both on television – including NTV – and in leading newspapers, resembled in many respects how Soviet authorities handled the coverage of the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan twenty years before.<sup>35</sup>

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32 See Leon Rabinovich Aron, *Russia's Revolution: Essays 1989-2006*, (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2007).

33 Vitalij Tretyakov, "The Tale of Two Plots", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 23 October 1999, ([http://www.ng.ru/english/two\\_plots.html](http://www.ng.ru/english/two_plots.html)).

34 See, David R. Stone, *A Military History of Russia: From Ivan the Terrible to the War in Chechnya*, (Westport, Praeger, 2006).

35 Roland Dannreuther, *Russia and Islam: State, Society and Radicalism*, (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2010), p. 76.

Unsurprisingly, the war in Chechnya was treated only from a Russian perspective. The media showed the war and commented on it strictly from the Russian Generals and the Kremlin's perspective. The military campaign was portrayed as a successful "operation," intended not against a belligerent national group, but against a gang of "thugs" and "terrorists." Unlike the images transmitted during the previous war, when the Russian public could watch and hear on the screen disoriented and poorly equipped soldiers next to cheerful Generals, this time around the media made every effort to shape a positive outlook on the war among the Russians. Now, the information being broadcasted were images of young and healthy Russian soldiers attacking training camps and arms depots of "terrorists." These operations were taking place without significant cost in terms of casualties in the ranks of the Russian military or hardships among now grateful Chechen civilians.<sup>36</sup>

The tens of thousands of civilians who fled the battle zones were either invisible or appeared on TV screens in circumstances where they were either given a helping hand by newly appointed pro-Russian authorities or provided paternal guidance by vigilant and protective Russian generals. The Chechen guerilla forces ("terrorists") were visible only when they could appear as prisoners or be portrayed as 'losers.' With few exceptions, Chechen counterattacks all but disappeared from the mainstream news. Funerals of lost Russian soldiers were announced in the media as national days of mourning and were observed with utmost dignity. The sorrow and sobbing of those who lost a son, a relative or a friend as a result of Russian forces' bombing of Chechen villages were kept away from the public view, unless it served some PR value. Rare Chechen attacks shown on television served to foster anti-Chechen sentiment within Russia and further galvanize support for the Russian Army.<sup>37</sup>

Some newspapers, such as *Moskovskie Novosti* and the English-language *New Times*, painted a somewhat more subtle picture of the war, and sometimes even published interviews with representatives of the Chechen camp. However, these relatively few exceptions made no significant difference since the mainstream media had wholeheartedly joined the chorus – as if the media were all plugged into the same outlet – praising the armed forces' military actions in Chechnya and providing no dissenting voices. Public opinion was influenced by

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36 Vicken Cheterian, *War and Peace in the Caucasus: Ethnic Conflict and the New Geopolitics*, (New York: Columbia University, 2009), pp. 67-80.

37 Ibid.

large television channels which continually and unilaterally supplied Russians a positive view of the war and rarely underscored its human cost or moral issues. "This is totality government propaganda," said Andrey Piontkovsky, an analyst at the Center for Strategic Studies in Moscow, in an interview with a Western correspondent in mid-October 1999. "All television channels and newspapers are filled with a single slogan: Liquidate them all, crush the scum, a patriotic war is underway."<sup>38</sup>

TV viewers could see a difference between the three major Russian TV channels in their coverage of the war. On a question asked by an ITAR-TASS (Information Telegraph Agency of Russia) reporter as to whether he believed it was normal, from an objective point of view, that Chechens could not be heard in the mainstream media, a TV viewers replied: "Should we let 'bandits' have their say? Nowhere in the world can you see anything like that." Asked whether he believed that Russian attacks in Chechnya caused suffering among civilians, he replied: "This time they do not suffer."<sup>39</sup> The growing international criticism of Russian warfare in Chechnya was reported in limited doses on Russian TV channels, usually accompanied by negative or ironic comments from journalists or politicians. This type of reaction echoed throughout major TV channels when the European Council released a "Declaration on Chechnya" on December 10, 1999 in which it "condemned" the intense bombing of Chechen cities, the threat leveled at the residents of Grozny and the ultimatum set by the Russian military commanders, as well as the treatment of the internally displaced persons as totally "unacceptable" or when American President Bill Clinton publicly disapprove of Russian methods during his visit to Oslo on November 1 and 2, 1999.<sup>40</sup>

The one-sided coverage among the Russian population and the relaxation of negative impacts presented in all leading mass media – even those who had been critical during the First Chechen War – produced an attitude change in favor of the Kremlin's policy of threatening or intimidating the Chechen people. The war was in political circles and the mass media consistently described as being an "anti-terrorist operation," not as a war against the Chechen people. As soon as Shamil Basayev and his men retreated to Chechnya after giving a 'helping hand'

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38 Peter Graff, "Once Dovish Russia Media now Chechnya Hawks", *Russia Today*, 20 October 1999, (<http://www.russiatoday.com/features.php3?id=102570>).

39 Arkadii Babchenko, *One Soldier's War*, (New York: Grove Press, 2008), p. 84.

40 Declaration on Chechnya from the Presidency Conclusions, Helsinki European Council, 10 and 11 December 1999, (<http://www.eurunion.org/partner/summit/summit9912/chechnya.html>).

to Dagestani insurgents, Russian forces launched air strikes against “terrorist camps” located in the eastern part of Chechnya.<sup>41</sup> Prime Minister Putin assured the Russian population that there were no attacks on peaceful villages in Chechnya, but only military operations to physically eliminate “terrorists.” Other Russian officials said attacks on Chechnya are aimed solely at “Islamic militants.”<sup>42</sup>

In a speech given at the State Duma on September 14, just a few days after a deadly bomb blast reduced a Moscow eight-story apartment building to a heap of bricks and dust and killed more than 100 people, including 10 children,<sup>43</sup> Putin declared that he was “convinced that there is a Chechen connection in the Moscow bombings” (NUPI Database September 15, 1999). He also stated during a Federal Council meeting that “a terrorist war against Russia had begun, and that those behind the attacks are expertly trained international saboteurs.”<sup>44</sup> While Putin called for a series of resolute measures against Chechnya, including the creation of a cordon sanitaire around the Republic borders and the “destruction” of all Chechen guerrilla structures, he once again stressed that it was the group of “bandits, not the Chechen people” that had to be crushed.<sup>45</sup>

Henceforth, Putin reiterated on many occasions that it was important to distinguish between Chechen bandits and the ordinary people of Chechnya. However, he never explained how it would be feasible in practice, nor did the Russian media outlets, which parroted the government’s insinuations about a link between the bombings in Moscow and Chechen terrorists. While Putin, in a television interview broadcasted on October 16, 1999, once again stressed that it was important to distinguish between “bandits and peaceful Chechens, who are our citizens,”<sup>46</sup> the journalist conducting the interview did not ask the sensible question of how Russian pilots, who dropped bombs on Chechen villages, were able to distinguish between “bandits” and peaceful Chechens.

Viktor Chernomyrdin, the longest serving prime minister (1992-98) under Yeltsin presidency, could also without trouble answer questions from journalists

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41 M. de Haas, *Russian Security and Air Power, 1992-2002: The Development of Russian Security Thinking under Yeltsin and Putin and its Consequences for the Air Forces*, (London; New York: Frank Cass, 2004).

42 Timur Muzajev, “Politika strakha”, *Russkaya Mysl*, 23-29 November 1999, p. 3.

43 Angela Charlton, “116 Killed in Moscow Explosion”, *The Associated Press*, 14 September 1999.

44 Robert W. Schaefer, op. cit., p. 78.

45 Ibid

46 Ibid., p. 82.

and get away with the following statement in a television interview a few days after Putin: "This time we have to admit that the Army is behaving properly and in civilized way."<sup>47</sup> Grigory Yavlinsky, an economist and liberal politician, who declared his opposition to the First Chechen War, could also affirm without impunity that "our armed forces are what they are. There are reasons to criticize them, but in this case it is necessary that we back them up."<sup>48</sup> Apparently, the journalist had a similar opinion on the war. He had no further questions.

The media's uncritical acceptance of the official version of the attack on Chechnya as an operation that was directed solely against terrorists contributed to the Russian public view that the war just and needed. Politicians and civil society actors' silence on the problem of how Russian forces can distinguish between terrorists and non-terrorists created the impression that the problem was not real.

During the 1994-96 war journalists critical of the Kremlin's policy repeatedly reported that Russian forces were not – as alleged in the official propaganda – fighting against a "bunch of "thugs" led by the "corrupt" president Dzhokhar Dudayev, but against an enemy organized like a popular resistance movement. In 1999, it was also clear from the beginning that there was a popular resistance against the invasion of Russian forces. However, issues such as where did the Chechen "terrorists" get their logistic support from, or how it could be that the Chechen population refused to cooperate with the newly formed Russian puppet government, were never raised.<sup>49</sup>

Unlike the first war, during which journalists criticized the legitimacy of some central government's puppet bodies, they had this time to produce news reports emphasizing the legality and efficiency of the Army's operation. Thus, Russian citizens were left with the impression that everything was going "according to the plan." Images of angry Chechens condemning Shamil Basayev's interference in the Dagestani insurgency confirmed this impression. Moreover, popular media, news reports and commentaries provided by pundits never mentioned that Aslan Mashkadov, the legitimately Chechen elected president, also denounced Basayev's incursion into Dagestan and repeatedly offered Moscow assistance in combating "terrorism" on the Chechen territory. The first measure

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47 Tracey C. German, op. cit., p. 54.

48 Ibid., p. 55.

49 See Yossef Bodansky, *Chechen Jihad: al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror*, (New York, NY: Harper, 2007), p. 233.



Putin took after the sequence of bombings in Moscow was to ingeniously reject President Maskhadov as illegitimate. He quickly became persona non grata with the Russian media as well as the central government.

Emil Pain was one of the few Russian observers who believed that one had to distinguish between “terrorists” and “Chechnya’s armed separatists.” According to him, Basayev and his allied groups of rebels could not be equated with President Maskhadov and Chechen armed forces. In a newspaper article published in late December 1999, he claimed that “manipulation of the public opinion and the repression of critical opinions on State television is throwing us back to the pre-perestroika period.”<sup>50</sup> While many demonstrations involving soldiers, soldiers’ mothers and various strains of activists had been reported by the media during the 1994-96 war, this time there were remarkably few reports on the grassroots activities of this nature. Demonstrations did take place, however, only Western media informed their viewers and readers of such events.

In a *Moskovskie Novosti* article, which appeared in a late December issue – when the media started to be more balanced in their coverage –, human rights activist Sergei Kovalev wrote in the newspaper that many Western journalists often ask him if he is the only one who deplores the new war in Chechnya. There are, in reality, “quite a few” who openly oppose the war, wrote Kovalev. But “those who do not agree with the Russian authorities’ actions in Chechnya are totally denied access to the pages of the major print media and the influential electronic mass media avoid them. In view of the information blockade maintained by the authorities, it is astonishing that anyone has ever heard of my political views. (...) I’m not dumb, but ‘censors’ work only too well.”<sup>51</sup>

In mid-November 1999, *Russkaya Mysl* carried an article by the Russian journalist Zoia Svetova, in which she attacked human rights organization for their quiescence in the face of persistent pattern of gross abuse of Chechen rights. Svetova had tried to get the article published in Moscow, but with no avail. “I submitted this article to a number of Moscow newspapers which I thought covered the war in Chechnya rather objectively. But not one of them believed it was necessary to read what human rights defenders had to say,” wrote Svetova in a Postscript to her article.<sup>52</sup>

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50 Sergei Kovalev, “Zachem nuzhny “vragi naroda”?”, *Moskovskie Novosti*, Vol. 7, 21-27 December 1999.

51 Ibid.

52 Zoya Svetova, “Mechta o zheleznom zanavese. V chom vinovaty pravozashchitniki?”, *Russkaja Mysl*, 25 November – 1 December 1999, p. 5.

As human rights activists like Sergei Kovalev, Yelena Bonner (Andrei Sakharov's widow) and priest Gleb Yakunin, who gained respect for their efforts during the 1994-96 war, were almost invisible in the mainstream media, many Russians came to the conclusion that if they do not protest against Russian troops' behavior in Chechnya, it must signify that the current military operation is implemented in respect to internal and international laws. Human rights activists' forced quietness was thus contributing to legitimize the war in the eyes of the public and helped the central government corraling widening support from disgruntled military and other interested social groups. Legitimation was also enhanced because the government could count among its supporters a number of famous Russian exiled philosophers and writers, such as Vasily Aksionov, Aleksandr Janov and Aleksander Zinoviev, who during the Communist regime were symbols of resistance against the Soviet system's oppression and censorship. With this backing, the Kremlin had more grist for its political and military agenda.

The impact of respected journalists who vented their anger about the amateurish handling of the situation in Chechnya in 1994-96 but who now described in favorable terms military ground operations can also be counted as an influential factor in the change in public attitude. Many of these journalists began to feel an ever creeping sense of disappointment over the political developments in Chechnya. Their disillusionment about the political evolution in Grozny had already been made clear a few months before the outbreak of hostilities. "Unfortunately, many of Chechen fighters whom we saw as 'heroes of the independence struggle' turned out to be outright criminals. And not just the bandits [were to blame]. The leadership in Grozny completely failed to build a civilized society, "declared Andrei Terkassov, a journalist who covered the last war for NTV, in an interview with a Western correspondent in October 1999.<sup>53</sup>

The indignation of journalists was chiefly aroused by a series of kidnappings of colleagues which were carried out by Chechen criminal gangs.<sup>54</sup> "In 1997, NTV reporter Yelena Masyk and a film crew were held by Chechen gangsters in a cave for 100 days. They were released only after NTV paid a seven figure ransom. TV stations' coverage of Chechnya was never the same afterwards."<sup>55</sup>

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53 Peter Graff, "Once Dovish Russia Media Now Chechnya Hawks", *Russia Today*, 20 October 1999, (<http://www.russiatoday.com/features.php3?id=102570>).

54 See Camilla Carr & Jonathan James, *The Sky Is Always There: Surviving a Kidnapping in Chechnya*, (Norwich: Canterbury, 2008).

55 Ibid.

In a telephone survey of 500 Muscovites conducted by Public Opinion Foundation in November 1999, seven out of ten respondents (70%) said that media coverage of the Second Chechen war had improved compared to that of the first war. Only 8% said that it was worse. Just over seven in ten (71%) considered that the media coverage of the Chechen forces' actions was "complete and thorough" while only just over two in ten, (22%) thought that it was not. On the other hand, while over half of respondents, (53%) were dissatisfied with the coverage of the actions of Russian forces', only 41% were being fully satisfied. Respondents also considered that more media coverage was devoted to the strategy and actions of the Russian side than to the Chechen side.

Overall, the phone poll revealed that 37% believed that the coverage of the war was objective but nearly half (49%) took the opposite view. Interestingly enough, another telephone survey conducted in Moscow in mid-November demonstrated that nearly two-third (64%) of those polled believed that they "have freedom of speech" in Russia, while 28% thought just the opposite.<sup>56</sup>

### **The Presidential Campaign and the War**

In comparison to the media coverage of the First Russian war in Chechnya, a crucial difference was noted in the manner the war was presented on TV channels and in the print media. The predominantly positive and problem-free presentation of a host of military engagements significantly contributed to marked changes in Russian public opinion concerning the war. In this section we will discuss how the war was reported and the reason why critical thinking was mostly absent in the media between mid-October and December of 1990.

As in the 1996 presidential election, the media proved highly instrumental in implementing a classical Leninist strategy based on launching an armada of "propagandists" and "agitators" to stir public emotions and engender outrage. The Kremlin now had more goals to achieve than in 1996, although the approach was the same. A marked difference, however, could be noted: the use of funds was more efficient and cost effective.

Putin, an unknown ex-FSB chief who had only just been appointed Prime Minister by Yeltsin after the unexpected sacking of Sergei Stepashin on August 9, 1999, quickly realized that he could make substantial political capital out of

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56 See Wojciech Jagielski, *Towers of Stone: The Battle of Wills in Chechnya*, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2009), p. 23.

the Russian armed forces' successful operation in Dagestan in late August. The defeat of the Wahhabite rebels and the Army's success in driving the Chechens out of Dagestan proved a windfall. Putin gained with one successful military strike both name recognition and popularity. The operation was not a total success, though, as Putin failed to put down the Chechen guerrilla leaders. They were driven back to Chechnya, but not totally smashed. Under the slogan "struggle against international terrorism," Putin was not only able to launch an armed attack on Chechnya but also to begin his own electoral campaign for the presidency. Yeltsin had already declared that he regarded Putin as his apparent successor. However, such an endorsement could not be taken at face value, and was a dark shadow over the campaign, as the newcomer to Russian politics perceived this backing as more of a burden than a benefit. Yeltsin's reputation, indeed, was now at its lowest domestically.<sup>57</sup> To be labeled "Yeltsin's man" did not give Putin an hedge in the incipient electoral campaign. Putin had to create his own political profile in order to have any real chance of prevailing over the already popular Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov and former Foreign Minister and Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, who was already unofficially campaigning for succeeding Yeltsin.<sup>58</sup>

The apartment blasts that hit two districts of Moscow in early September proved a catalyst in strengthening Putin's political profile and carving out his image as a politician willing to use an "iron hand" against the Chechen "terrorists". His vigorous reaction and his September 24 solemn promise to the population to go after "terrorists everywhere" and to "corner the bandits in the toilet and wipe them out" brought his popularity to such a level that, according to opinion polls, he led voting intentions – over both Luzhkov and Primakov – by a large margin. Due to the consolidation of his hard-line "law and order" image, his popularity quickly rose from 2 to 13% in a matter of days.<sup>59</sup> This surge in support for Putin was further exacerbated by the rapid mobilization of state-owned television channels RTV and ORT in an effective propaganda campaign. Their task was simple: To disseminate the Kremlin candidate's position, and to effectively counter the campaign messages of both Luzhkov and Primakov. In the print media

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57 Gabriel Gorodetsky, *Russia Between East and West: Russian Foreign Policy on the Threshold of the Twenty-First*, (London: Frank Cass, 2003), p. 189.

58 See Sebastian Smith, *Allah's Mountains: The Battle for Chechnya*, (London; New York: TPP, 2006), pp. 88-115.

59 Vitalij Tretyakov, "The Tale of Two Plots", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 23 October 1999, ([http://www.ng.ru/english/two\\_plots.html](http://www.ng.ru/english/two_plots.html)).

Putin could already count on the loyal support of newspapers like *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, *Novaya Izvestia*, *Kommersant* and *Ogoniok*.

While the two television channels helped Putin convert the Moscow bombings into immediate political capital, they became a hindrance to the Luzhkov campaign. As an elected mayor responsible, inter alia, for the “security” of Moscow residents, he in no time realized that the bombings threatened his political career at the local as well as the national level. They would not only shrink his chances of being re-elected in the December mayoral election but also gravely affect the national electoral campaign of his Fatherland-All Russia Party (Otechestvo-Vsya Rossiya) in the possibly hard-fought December 19 Russian parliamentary elections. Luzhkov viewed these two elections as reliable barometers of the likelihood of him winning the presidential election scheduled for the spring of 2000.

Luzhkov grasped that the people’s fear of new attacks had been transformed into an election issue that Putin was increasingly monopolizing.<sup>60</sup> Therefore Luzhkov also publicly declared his resolute support for the “fight against terrorism,” which was for all practical purposes, Putin’s war in Chechnya. Distancing himself from Putin’s hard line against the “Chechen bandits” would have been tantamount to political suicide. In order to ward off criticism for his lack of vigilance Luzhkov therefore introduced a string of restrictions and controls on “foreigners” in Moscow. According to *Russkaya Mysl*, Luzhkov even outshone Putin in populist attempts to turn the Chechens into scapegoats for the dreadful bombings.<sup>61</sup>

NTV and TV Tsentr also became an active participant in the war propaganda machine. Like ORT and RTV, which regarded propaganda as their “natural” responsibility to promote Putin for the forthcoming presidential election, NTV and TV Tsentr were on a mission to promote Luzhkov, who happened to maintain close ties with the owner of NTV and Media-Most, Vladimir Gusinsky. In the print media, Luzhkov could always count on the backing of *Moskovskie Komsomolets* and *Segodnya*, which were also controlled by Gusinsky. Much of what was being published or broadcasted came at the request of special interests groups and political agendas.

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60 Sebastian Smith, op. cit., p. 77.

61 Yekaterina Mikhajlovskaja, “Parlamentskaja khronika”, *Russkaya Mysl*, 22-29 November 1999, p. 2; Muzajev Timur, “Politika strakha”, *Russkaya Mysl*, 23-29 November 1999, p. 3.

Luzhkov was not the only potential candidate able to whittle away at Putin's high ratings. Gennady Zyuganov and Grigory Yavlinsky, the Communist Party and Yabloko party leaders respectively, declared very early in the campaign their support for Putin's "war on terrorism" and the deployment of forces in northern Chechnya. Put simply, no candidate in the upcoming presidential election or the elections to the Duma could ignore the popular enthusiasm for tough methods and a hard line in Chechnya.

The two newly created liberal parties, the Union of Right Forces (SPS) and the Unity Party ("Edinstvo"), also sided with the warmongers. Neither of the two new formations had their own media outlets, but both could expect favorable and detailed coverage from both RTV and ORT. SPS was led by former Prime Minister Sergei Kirienko, however the party's chief strategist and key figure was the head of the state-owned electrical power monopoly Unified Energy System (1998-2008) and former Privatization Minister Anatoly Chubais. As a member of the Kremlin's inner circle, he could secure the party's access to both RTV and ORT. Chubais expressed his position on the war effort in Chechnya in these words: "In Chechnya, the Russian Army is experiencing a renaissance; confidence in the Army has been recreated, and a politician who does not believe this cannot be considered a Russian politician. In such cases, there is only one name for these politicians, traitor."<sup>62</sup>

The Unity Party was founded on the Kremlin's initiative in September 1999 to function as a counterweight to Luzhkov's Otechestvo and pave the way for providing Putin with majority support at the Duma in the December 1999 parliamentary elections. The party was led by the Minister of Emergency Situations Sergei Shoigu, whose electoral campaign was widely covered by RTV and ORT. The Unity Party, indeed, crept up quickly in the December 1999 opinion polls, gathering more support than the Communist Party.<sup>63</sup>

In mid-November 1999 Putin, who was Prime Minister at the time, officially announced that he would run in the March 2000 presidential election. Until that declaration, Luzhkov had entertained the slim hope that the Kremlin would not bet on the former head of the FSB (one of the successor agencies to the KGB). After all, Yeltsin had not the habit of keeping his prime ministers in post for

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<sup>62</sup> *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 2 December 1999.

<sup>63</sup> Tuck Wesolowsky, "Moscow Mayor Enjoys Support in Moscow as his Party Slips in Polls", 16 December 1999.

long. In parallel, opinion polls were indicating that Putin's party, the Unity Party, would get more votes in the upcoming parliamentary elections than Luzhkov's Otechestvo. A great success for the Unity Party in the November 1999 elections would be a strong signal that Putin, rather than Luzhkov, would win the presidential election a few months later. Given these circumstances, it was important for Luzhkov, who had previously given the impression of being a supporter not so much of Putin the man but of his policies in Chechnya, to distinguish himself from the Prime Minister's plans of action.. One way Luzhkov could stand out against Putin, and among other contenders, was to distance himself from the ongoing escalation of the war in Chechnya. Luzhkov started to spread the idea of maintaining a cordon sanitaire around Chechnya and to emphasize that more limited military operations would be the most appropriate response to the Chechen rebels. Luzhkov's strategy, although not misconceived overall, was, however, further weakened by a fierce smear campaign against him led by ORT.

Luzhkov's campaign redirection 'coincided' with NTV's shift in its coverage of the war. NTV's coverage of the conflict changed significantly; it became more balanced. Since NTV's patron (Gusinsky) was now gravely weakened, as many political signs indicated that Russia's next president would be neither Luzhkov nor Yevgeny Primakov, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs under Yeltsin, NTV (i.e., Media-Most and Gusinsky) had no more reason to support Putin's line on Chechnya. The political calculation was that if Putin won the presidential election NTV would be far more vulnerable to pressure from the Kremlin than if Luzhkov won.<sup>64</sup>

In this situation, NTV chose to take a more critical stance on the war and was gradually joined by other Russian media outlets. By then, however, it was too late to influence Russian public opinion in a decisive way. Otechestvo's bad electoral choices in December and other parties' slanders and gossiping quickly put an end to Luzhkov's prospects of running in the Russian presidential election. Putin's war remained popular, as evidenced by the above-mentioned surveys and support mechanism and effective PR.<sup>65</sup>

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64 Ibid.

65 See Dale R. Herspring, *The Kremlin & the High Command: Presidential Impact on the Russian Military from Gorbachev to Putin*, (University Press of Kansas, 2006).

## The Babitsky Affair

NTV's – and Luzhkov's – more critical stance was immediately perceived by Putin's electoral team as increasing the hazard of failure. His main concern during the 2000 election was to retake control in Chechnya, preferably achieving a complete victory a few weeks before the election. All that he needed was to reinforce the perception, created by the media, that positive results were being brought about by the Russian military, and that stabilization and peace were being established in Chechnya and the North Caucasus.<sup>66</sup>

In mid-January 2000 Andrei Babitsky, a Russian journalist covering the conflict for Radio Liberty's Russian Bureau, was arrested under mysterious circumstances in Chechnya. Babitsky had gained great respect for his reporting during the previous 1994-96 Russian-Chechen war. At the time of his arrest he was one of the few independent journalists still reporting from behind Chechen lines. In December 1999 NTV presented a series of sensational videos in which Babitsky commented on the Russian Army's movements and heavy bombings on Chechen territory. These videos aroused anger among both Russian politicians and the military community.<sup>67</sup> In particular, Babitsky showed elaborately the bodies of dozens of dead Russian soldiers and officers – precisely the kind of footage that could undermine Putin's presidential campaign. To his credit, Babitsky did not shy away from reporting Chechen atrocities too.

At the outset of the Russian bombing of the Chechen capital Grozny in January 2000, the Kremlin confidently announced that all civilians had left the city and, consequently, massive casualties were impossible. Babitsky, who had managed to get into the besieged Grozny, contradicted this official statement by reporting that civilians did remain in the bombed buildings. On January 15 he disappeared. Russian officials at first denied that they knew anything about his whereabouts. However, a friend of Babitsky leaked that on January 16 he had been detained by the Russian Army while trying to flee Grozny. Twelve days later the authorities admitted to having him in custody. On February 4, 2000 Sergei Yastrzhembsky, the Kremlin spokesman, announced that the Radio Liberty journalist had been handed over to Chechen insurgents in exchange for

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66 See Gary K. Bertsch [et.], *Crossroads and Conflict: Security and Foreign Policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia*, (New York: Routledge, 2000).

67 Oleg Panfilov, "Babitsky - A Victim of Putin's Valkamp," *Göteborgs-Posten*, Vol. 44, 16 March 1999.



Russian soldiers held prisoners in the mountains. The Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov, as well as rebel commanders, denied ever having been involved in such an exchange.<sup>68</sup>

The Babitsky affair was perceived in the Russian media as a message to Russian journalists that the Kremlin would not accept reports which challenged the official line on the war. It also elicited a bold reaction from journalists. On February 9 about fifty Russian journalists signed an open letter, published in *Russkaya Mysl*, in which they condemned the political “authorities’ cynicism towards the media.” The article continued: “If Babitsky has ever done anything illegal, this should be determined by a judicial court through appropriate legal procedures. If Babitsky’s detention was the result of the content of his reports on the war in Chechnya, then, this is a clear violation of the freedom of the press guaranteed by Constitution,” wrote the journalists, who at the same time demanded to know the full truth about what had happened to Babitsky.<sup>69</sup>

The signatories of the letter were mostly journalists working for Gusinsky’s media empire, which in turn endorsed Luzhkov’s candidacy. Later, some Communist media outlets entered into a second round of accusations concerning the authorities’ treatment of the media and information. Babitsky was released on 28 February 2000 on condition that he should not leave Moscow. On March 10, 2000, in an interview with the newspaper *Kommersant*, Putin, laid the blame on Babitsky and charged him with treason and collaboration with Chechen warlords, and commented: “Here you say that he is a Russian citizen. Well, one has to obey the law of one’s country if one counts on being treated according to the law.”<sup>70</sup>

In October 2000, Babitsky was granted amnesty after having been tried for carrying a forged passport, which he claimed, had been slipped into his pockets by representatives of the Russian Army.

## Conclusion

The journalists who protested over the Babitsky affair demonstrated that they were capable of defending press freedom against the authorities’ arbitrary in-

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68 See Aleksandro I. Kapidze (Ed.), *Caucasus Region: Geopolitical Nexus?*, (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2007), pp. 44-56.

69 “Zajavlenie zhurnalistov o deystviyakh rossijskikh vlastej po otnosheniju k Andreju Babitskomu”, *Russkaya Mysl*, 10-16 February 2000, p. 5.

70 Pavel Gutiontoyov, “Zauryadnoye Delo”, *Delovoy Vtornik*, 2 March 2010, ([http://www.ruj.ru/authors/gut/100303\\_4.htm](http://www.ruj.ru/authors/gut/100303_4.htm)).

terference in the media and had the fortitude to do so. However, the fact that journalists' first reaction came after a serious attempt by the authorities to silence one of their colleagues who had been critical of the government's policy also reveals that the journalists' obligation to act as society's watchdog and facilitator of information sharing had not yet been fully understood or taken deep roots within the Russian and post Soviet journalism profession. Although many journalists were personally uncomfortable with the Kremlin's crackdown on the independent media, the majority of them sat quietly back and watched without arguing the Russian government's denial of access to the media of the human rights activist Sergei Kovalev and many other less well-known journalists. Also, for all the lies and falsehoods about the true extent of military operations in Chechnya, many journalists refused to accord them the revulsion that the government and the armed forces' deeds deserved; they simply diverted attention to other aspects of the conflict and conjured up a non-alarmist image of what was going on the ground. That attitude cast a shadow of doubt over journalists' credibility and their professional ethics.

Protests in connection with the Babitsky case testified to the possibility of protest in Russia at that time and to the effect they could produce on the political authorities. These protests, in several ways, came too late, though. They did not serve as a warning signal to the political forces – as personified by Putin – which were gaining ground in the Russian political spectrum with the help of the media. They also came too late to change people's views on the war in Chechnya and to strengthen the hope which many inside and outside Russia had entertained, i.e. that the Russian media had finally consolidated itself as an independent sphere embedded between the political power and the market.

In the period following the 1999 Chechnya war, the Russian media started to look more and more like the Soviet media. When Putin became president of the Russian Federation – as a protégé of Boris Yeltsin's close circle of supporters – in March 2000, the Russian media were again tamed by a much more authoritarian political regime than Yeltsin's regime. Independence and freedom were crushed. He significantly increased the influence of state-owned media and the state's control over private media. Furthermore, his attack against the oligarchs was a deliberate attempt to get rid of pluralism in the Russian media and to assure the supremacy of the state. For instance, journalists continued to be victims of violent attacks. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) ranked Russia at that time as one of the 10 most dangerous places in the world to be a journalist.<sup>71</sup>

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71 Robert Coalson, "We have Definitely Moved Backwards: An Overview of Media in Russia", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Online*, 18 June 2004, (<http://www.rferl.org/reports/mm/2004/06/11-180604.asp>).

Putin tightened the grip over the media both through legal nationalization of several powerful media channels and through the enactment of laws that restricted media freedom and independence. As a result, according to Freedom House, Russia's press freedom rating dropped from 142 in 2004 to 148 in 2005, a ranking that put it into the category of "not free" press.<sup>72</sup>

Two new policy changes transformed the Russian media landscape from a "partly free" to a "not free" sector. In January 2000, Putin extended control over the media by signing a new law that transferred the administration of government subsidies for regional newspapers from local elected representatives to the press ministry. Two thousand small and subsidized newspapers were affected by the law, which beefed-up the central government's control.<sup>73</sup> In September 2000, the newly-elected President approved the Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation. The doctrine developed the National Security Concept of the Russian Federation as applied to the information sphere.<sup>74</sup>

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72 Ibid.

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